

1942

## You Yanquis

Erna Fergusson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Fergusson, Erna. "You Yanquis." *New Mexico Quarterly* 12, 3 (1942). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol12/iss3/3>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

# YOU YANQUIS

*Erna Fergusson*

**I**N OUR bustling eagerness to make friends with Latin America perhaps we are overlooking one very important party to the transaction. Do we know who is seeking friendship to the south? Can we even imagine how the North American looks to the people who receive his protestations, his emissaries, his literature, and his loans? Doubtless the people who have formulated and are carrying out the Good Neighbor policy have a very definite North American in mind—a sturdy, friendly fellow with democratic principles, honesty of purpose, and nothing remotely resembling an ulterior motive. We also know, in our several ways, the “American South” with whom this Yankee wishes to deal. We have, in fact, written for ourselves quite a literature on that subject. But the *Yanqui* whom the American South sees remains to us an unknown, even an unsuspected character. His very name, Yanqui, has connotations so different from our conception of Yankee that the most unreconstructed Southerner can respond to the title without resentment.

Because United States does not form a euphonious adjective—even in Spanish “Estado-unidense” is awkward—and the world-wide application of American to us offends Latin America, a substitute was inevitable. Mexico uses *gringo*. Hubert Herring, in his excellent *Good Neighbors*, has given us “Americans North” as opposed to “Americans South”; and that is good because it is relative. Canadians are north, Mexicans are south of us, though not in South America. But in Chile “Yanqui” is the common designation for a citizen of the United States. And in Chile it first dawned on me that the Yanqui was a well-defined personality with surprising virtues and vices, some of them so exaggerated as to stand in the way of any clear and adult understanding between us. Unfortunately for us, Americans South have not made quick trips across the United States and written superficial impressions of our quaint and curious ways, or how we seem to be adapting ourselves to

their superior civilization. They should by all means do this. V Americans North, greatly need to know what our neighbors think us. But until those books are available in English, I offer a few notes the Yanqui which were jotted down during several months in Chi

This did not come about through any design; with true Yanc complacency I was not concerned with what Chileans thought of us was thinking about them. But it soon became apparent that Chilea are sensitively, even painfully aware of us. Many, if not most, conver tions in that country sooner or later get round to polite questions abo "you Yanquis," to categorical statements, or even to a half-humorc "the trouble with you Yanquis. . . ." From such talks a character begi to take shape, even a whole family of characters with whom Chile dealing, while we plunge blindly ahead in the smug assurance th Chile knows the citizen we think we are. It is easy to say that Chilea are often mistaken, to cite instances in disproof of every trait the Chile considers typically Yanqui. But the truth or falsity of the picture is no immediate consequence; the important point is that this fictitic character is, for better or worse, the Yanqui against whom Chile judg what we do or say.

Chile knows, first, the Yanqui in his country. A young man who boyhood had been spent in the port of Valparaiso was offered a schol ship at a college in the United States. He wanted to go, but . . .

All I knew of Yanquis [he said] was what I had seen at Valpo: drunken sailors who insulted our women and smashed every- thing. They always offered to pay for what they smashed, but that to us was only added insult, for it made it so clear how little our pesos were worth against their dollars. We didn't want their dirty dollars (that's the way it seemed to us); we wanted them to treat us and our things with respect. So I went to the States with real trepidation. I was very young, you see. I had never traveled. I thought all Yanquis were ill-bred savages and when I got to New York and found how well mannered the people were and how kind, I couldn't believe it.

Sailors ashore are rowdy the world over. But men doing business a foreign country might be expected to put themselves out to ma friends; to conform somewhat to the customs of the land where th live. Yet this summation is typical.

Your men are interested only in business, they can talk nothing but business. They pay no attention to our politics unless their

precious dollars are threatened. They do not read our books. And one of them making a serious study of our history, even of our relations with his own country, is unthinkable. They are smugly, blindly unaware that we have a culture, that a life might be founded on anything besides business.

A sterner indictment of the business man is related of so many men in so many situations that there must be truth back of it somewhere. This version was told by a professor in one of Chile's universities.

One of our professors took a group of students to visit a great Yanqui plant. It is a splendid operation and well worth study. The group was conducted about by a young Yanqui who was very casual, almost rude. But our professor, who happens to be half English and a graduate of an English university, knows you Yanquis well. So he put on his Oxford accent and his most insufferable British manner. At once the Yanqui changed his tone to one of complete courtesy. He even asked the group to spend the night, offering the professor a room in the company guest house where "you won't have to associate with the natives." Remember that the professor was a "native" on the other side.

The professor who told the story will never forget it; whether he was Nazi or not I cannot say. But this is the sort of thing that the Nazis gleefully use against us.

Impossible to explain in Chile, where only gentlemen are educated, the ill-bred Yanqui was probably the graduate of some hinterland college where he might have had excellent technical training without acquiring either culture or manners. We need not be ashamed of him, because he is a product of our universal education; he has done well in the line he chose; his children will do better; they may even attain a culture capable of appreciating a foreign country. But we must deplore the fact that he has for so long been almost the only Yanqui Chile knew. The cultivated, considerate gentlemen we have also sent to Chile are always so unobtrusive (according to their kind) that they are looked upon as exceptions. "You would never take him for a Yanqui" is high praise in Chile.

The wives of these men—with some notable exceptions—Chileans brush aside with light scorn. "The Yanqui woman never interests herself in Chile, seldom bothers to speak a decent Spanish, knows nothing of our literature or history. She stays apart from our life, gets her clothes from the States, plays bridge with her friends, goes home as soon as she can."

Yanqui women, on their part, complain that Chilean women do not make them welcome. This is true for different reasons involving different classes. The small-town Chilean woman, who would be the natural friend of the Podunk woman living in Chile, does not speak English. And the Chilean woman who does speak English belongs to an aristocratic and very exclusive society. Until the war she lived in Europe more than in her own country, she moved among people of great names if not great titles. Chilean society is as inaccessible, if not more so, to the business man or engineer and his wife as is the society of, say, Philadelphia or Boston. When Yanqui women complain of Chilean women or vice versa, it is interesting to learn what class of woman in each case is speaking and what class she is talking about.

So much for the Yanqui living in Chile. Though many are liked even loved, the casual visitor with an ear cocked for both good and bad hears more bad than good. The Yanqui in Chile must mend his manners if he (including she) is going to make a vital contribution to international understanding and good will.

The casual Yanqui, traveling expensively through the country or staying a short time for study, as a government representative, or (most suspect of all) to write a book, has much to answer for. Now and then one earns heartfelt praise, and the terms of approbation are suggestive.

A professor of Chile's national university spoke of a member of our embassy, recently transferred. "He alone could solve all the problems of cultural relations between us. He dominated Castilian [as the Spanish phrase it], and he could use Chilean slang; he knew our history, had read our classics and kept up with modern books; he was more Chilean than the Chileans." Of a student of Chilean literature: "He became one of us. His printed studies of Chilean literature show deep understanding of the idiom and the mode of thought." Of another: "He and his wife became so much a part of Santiago that their going leaves a gap in our social and cultural life. They both spoke Spanish, they worked with the *Instituto Chileno Norte Americano de Cultura*; they sang in the Ambassador's choir; they were Chileans to us."

Another and a sadder story was told of a group of students from a small college in the United States. Off on a junket, they appeared more frequently in the night clubs than in the lecture halls; they put their feet on the plush seats of special railroad coaches supplied them as a courtesy; they failed to attend cultural or even social events planned for them. On one occasion, when they had been invited to a handsome

home, so few of the honor guests showed up that Chilean friends of the United States hastily substituted other Yanquis that the exquisite buffet supper should not go untasted, that the rude disregard of hospitality should not be too apparent. But it was apparent. That group of students has confirmed Chile's impression that all Yanquis are uncultured and ill mannered. Many generations of decenter students will have difficulty in changing that opinion.

Writers are looked upon with suspicion. As why should they not be? There is something impudent about bouncing into a country, uninvited, to write about it. A citizen might reasonably inquire: "Who are you, anyway? How dare you assume that you are fitted to write about us? Why should we who live here have to submit to have ourselves presented to your countrymen as we happen to strike you? Is your judgment any good? Is your heart in the right place? Can you speak our language, appreciate our point of view? Do you know our history, our literature? Are you going to stay long enough, study hard enough to qualify on any of these points?"

Chileans did not ask me just these questions, but they were implicit in many remarks.

A woman professor, looking at me with a calculating eye, said: "The most charming and clever Yanqui woman I ever knew lived at a mine. She studied Spanish, published a little paper in English which she filled up with news and items of interest about Chile. She studied at our University and read our books. She stayed five years. When we asked her why she did not write a book about Chile, she said she did not know enough."

A male colleague of hers said: "The trouble with you Yanquis is that you don't stay long enough. . . . You are staying longer? Good! But not long enough. . . . And these Yanqui newspaper men who stay four days, talking in bars with young exchange students who have some figures but who understand nothing and then write a book *explaining* Chile. . . . Well!" Spanish is rich in explosive expressions of scorn.

So Chile judges us by the examples we send. But Chile's Yanqui who comes from the movies and is rounded out by hearsay is an even more fantastic character and much more widely known. Gangsters, cowboys, divorcees, idle rich, flip youngsters, colleges dedicated to sports, government given over to graft, homes rife with dissension have produced a composite conception that marks even fairly mature judgments. Impossible to explain that movies are made of the striking and

unusual; that the everyday dullness of the law-abiding citizen, the modest home, the student who studies, the honest and efficient public servant, has no dramatic appeal. To an extent, truly alarming, Chile judges the American home as something fairly represented by *Philadelphia Story*, *The Women*, or *Susan and God*. And Yanqui women are more talked about and more misunderstood than men because the contrast is so sharp between the Chilean girl who is educated in a convent and guarded at home and the Yanqui girl who goes to school with boys, plays and works with them, and grows up to have a vote and a job.

The mildest judgment of the North American mother comes out in such comments as this.

Of course your mothers feel no responsibility for their families as we do. We always have to be with the grandmother, with the children, or the husband. You believe in individual rights; you let the old folks and the children look out for themselves. If your women tire of a husband or fall in love with another man, they divorce and remarry; they insist upon their right to be happy. We Chileans are all married to the wrong men because we marry so young and because we never know our husbands before marriage. Of course we are unhappy, but we stay with the wrong man for the sake of the children. Our children are our greatest concern, much greater than our own happiness.

Thinking of our intense young mothers with their books, magazines and lectures on infant care and child psychology, their constant concern that pre-school children shall not be left to servants, I asked, "Where do you get the notion that our mothers feel no concern for their children?"

"From the movies," she laughed, but went on to propound a truly disturbing question. "Please answer me frankly; I have heard it said often that all your girls begin life at thirteen or fourteen. Is that really true?"

"You mean mature?"

"No, begin to live, to know men. We hear that your way of educating boys and girls together leads naturally to babies; that all your girls—well, maybe not all—but it is the custom for girls to have babies very young, that there are great institutions to care for them; that the girls then enter a life of freedom and adventure and marry late. A friend of mine who was there said one seldom sees young mothers in the United States; that only mature women have legitimate babies."

This speech so overwhelmed my amazed brain that I could only muster up a few denials. I had recently read that the average girl in the United States marries at twenty or twenty-two. I said, but doubt that I was believed, that young people can study and play together without the need of maternity homes. But how can one combat such misinformation? My questioner, who had some doubt but was more than half convinced by what she had heard, was a mature woman of good family, with a sixteen-year-old daughter, well-read, widely traveled (in Europe, not in the United States), a writer, a person of much more than average intelligence.

Later I quoted this conversation to a sensible social worker, a Chilean woman who had studied and worked in the United States and knew our failures as well as our successes. She was grave.

Yes, such tales are widely believed. The movies partly. Propaganda too. We are not free of magazines which feature the worst Yanqui pictures and lurid news stories as generally true. . . .

But it is more serious that we find you on the whole simple and gullible. I know from my social work that trust is the best way to bring out the good in a person. Chileans do not believe that. They see pictures of your boys and girls together in sports, in swimming suits, unchaperoned; they think you are fooled in your belief that no evil comes of it.

Yet your American homes, filled with confidence, are wonderful, the happiest homes I have ever seen. And happiness is what you want most, isn't it? With us it is not so. Our mothers tell us to expect unhappiness with our husbands, with our children. . . . We are a lot of neurotics compared with you. A Chilean woman believes that if she loves her husband she must hang on him, if she loves her children she must hang over them and spoil them. Your methods, in comparison, are so—[she sought a word]—so professional. In a family everyone is an individual; everyone's rights are respected. I think your trust is sometimes carried to the point of being ridiculous, your confidence amounts to simplicity, but I think too that you avoid more evils with your methods than we ever do with ours.

Another Chilean woman, who knew only New York, found there a special and curious simplicity. Our guilelessness is a theme dear to Chileans.

Your young people take themselves so seriously, they have none of the Chilean's deprecating humor. A young Yanqui will



say: "I have a very interesting and unusual job. I'm head of my section in the corset department (or the drug store lunch counter or the hot dog factory)." They push it to the point of being utterly ridiculous. A sober youngster will say: "I am a writer . . . three plays, a short story. . . . Well, I haven't published anything yet, but I have such and such contacts, hopes. . . ."

A Chilean would die before he called himself a writer unless he had a long list of notable books to his credit, but *notable!* He'd be laughed at until he couldn't stand it. But the great difference is that you Yanquis have a self-respect that we lack. Each Yanqui feels himself a person of consequence. He has pride in himself, in his job. He is not afraid. We are afraid of ridicule, of failure, we are afraid to try. A Yanqui of ordinary talent can develop and train himself, get ahead, make a success. Here he would be lost.

So this brings us to the Chileans who have been in the United States. As a rule they admire our country and like us. Many of them are such intense adherents of the United States that they battle for us against their own. Even when their cool and critical observation looks through our pretentiousness and their penetrating humor makes sport of our bumptiousness, their mature judgment sees the other side of every shield, the virtues inherent in the vices, respects the fine principles on which our government is founded, and has confidence in our goal if not always in our ability to keep steering toward it.

And so this is the way the young student who feared that our entire population acted like drunken sailors in Valparaiso finished his story.

I called up my courage and went. I am a scientist; I wanted to see what was being done in my line. New York was not so good for a South American. But when I got beyond that—I went as far as California—I found the real Americans—kind, friendly, hospitable, generous.

Your people are generous as Europeans have never been. In Paris I called on the Director of the Pasteur Institute. He received foreigners, they told me, only on Thursday. So I stayed over almost a week to see him. The day I called I waited an hour. And when I did see him he would give me nothing; his knowledge was a secret to guard against foreigners. In Washington, in contrast, when I went to the bureau which interested me, I was received at once by the chief; in two minutes I was sitting at his desk. And he gave me every aid he could, let me see everything I wished. I did not feel like a stranger in the United States, but like a colleague.

Your friendliness is universal, but President Roosevelt has done wonders to express it. When he sent Sra. Davila home in a plane, all Chile appreciated it. That one act was worth any number of formal protestations, or cultural delegations. "Only a true friend," says the ordinary Chilean, "would do that."

A Chilean girl who spent four years in United States colleges said:

At first I found the girls too naïve and simple for any use. We, in our *liceos*, had deep philosophical talk, discussions of music or art. Those Yanqui girls seemed to have no intellectual interests at all. But afterward I found they could talk well if they were asked. Their frivolous front was a convention; back of it they worked hard, and they played hard too—at sports or at week-end dates. And they were marvelously friendly to me. I was taken to the loveliest homes and made to feel so at home.

I liked the girls' college better. I was in a co-educational one too; and there I found the competition as fierce as in a jungle. Sororities made treaties, but their real ethic is a tooth-and-claw one. And the get-your-man struggle is a fight to the death with no rules respected. In comparison the girls' college was filled with a wonderful spirit of mutual helpfulness and co-operation.

I'd like to live in the States, yes. The Yanqui is probably the best husband in the world. But as long as I teach, I'd rather live in Chile. Here there is more chance to use your ideas; we are just starting. There everything is cut and dried; you have to fit into a rigid system; your ideas are no good until you have taken many degrees and are too old and set to have a new idea.

It is only fair to state that this young woman teaches in the only progressive school in Chile.

Much of Chile's disesteem for us comes from what they have seen of our education. A young Chilean engineer, on his way to take a Westinghouse job, asked seriously:

Is it true that your college students are interested only in sports? A friend of mine wrote me from Stanford that the students there take no interest in politics or in abstract ideas. He says they will fight for the sports section of the paper and the funnies, but never read the serious pages. And the most popular man in the college—he said, but I cannot believe—is a champion at a sport, who has no books in his room, not even a chair at his desk. . . . Can this be true? And why is it? Why are they not interested in ideas, in affairs?

One need not be able to answer such questions to understand Chile's conception of the Yanqui.

More mature travelers, perhaps more guarded in what they say dwell on other qualities which are, after all, not incompatible with gullibility and lack of culture.

One of a group of newspaper men who spent a month working on daily in the United States and another month in travel, said:

To me the most impressive quality of the United States was its spirituality—yes, spirituality. I expected commercialism, materialism, preoccupation with money. I found people everywhere concerned with the general welfare, generous in giving money and support to every effort for good.

And hospitable! Surely there never was such hospitality! Not labored like ours, but casual and completely sincere. They seem to say: "So here you are! Well, make yourself at home!" And they mean just that. With none of the protestations we make they make you feel that you are really at home and may do as you like.

And kind! Even in your hectic great cities a Yanqui will stop in full flight to understand a South American's halting question, to give directions, even to walk along and show the way.

A woman who knew only New York, had another impression.

Any other city [she said] could be known from reading about it. New York, never, because its most notable quality is its rhythm. Without having felt that one can never know New York. Everybody is caught in its pace. Let one fall fainting or injured and who can stop to help? Nobody! If one pauses a second on a subway stair he loses his train, misses his connection, arrives late, loses his job. For no human consideration prevails against the rate and pace of the machine.

This Doña Julia had never beheld the throngs that gather round an accident, free to stand gaping until the police make them give way for the ambulance with stretcher bearers, doctor, and nurse. The importance of her observation seems to be in her impression of a life so geared to the machine that all human values are lost.

An old scholar and gentleman just back from his first visit to the United States had also noted a human lack. He received me in his library with busts of the philosophers on the tall bookcases and books piled everywhere. He rose courteously to greet me, but sank promptly back into the armchair which he had long ago shaped to fit his every curve. "I should have gone when I was younger," he smiled.

At almost eighty, one is too old to stand the excitement, to accustom oneself to strange customs. Meal hours were new to me, and

the quantity of food seemed very little. As you know, we Chileans eat too much. And glasses of water with ice in them to take with meals? No, no, I could never do that after a lifetime of Chilean wines.

And in the United States there are no servants. That I could never adjust myself to. All my life I have had four or five people to answer my bell, to attend me, to lay out my clothes, to hand me things. In your country there are no servants, only employees. . . . It's democracy, I know. I admire it, I believe in it, I've been a democrat all my life. But I couldn't live it.

A Chilean woman who has lived in our country and really studied it, gave me a summing up of our character as she found us at home, which may perhaps offer some solace for what Chileans think of us in Chile.

After three visits to the United States [she said] I began to get its essence. Especially after a three-cornered trip I made to the United States, to Europe, and back to your country again. We are so much closer to Europe than you are. I saw that. I felt your freshness, your youth, your simple directness. Compare Charles Boyer in *El Puerto de Oro* [*Hold Back the Dawn*] with the innocent schoolteacher played by Olivia de Havilland and you will see what I mean. We are closer to the complicated European with his mixed motives, his indirections, his distrust of everyone. You have faith as we have not. In spite of our reputed Catholicism you are much more religious. People talk about their religion. Curious! They always asked me what my religion was. It gave me such a shock the first time. One would never do that in Chile. Never!

But you Yanquis are honest, completely frank. You say what you think; you are direct and clear. That is why, often, we find you crude. We cannot bear the full clear light you shed. We are afraid to see too much. We do not trust each other as you do. You really have no classes. There are rich and poor; there are different social cliques, but there is constant movement among groups. You have no rigid class lines as we have. The United States, compared with any other country I have known, is a true democracy. Men meet each other on a level, deal with each other honestly. There is complete unity among you.

This was leaving me even more breathless than some of the critical remarks I had heard. "Unity?" I recalled our politics, our isolationists, our professional howlers. "Unity of what?"

"In your fundamental belief in liberty, in the value and dignity of the individual, in your tolerance. . . ."

"Ojala!" I said, using the expressive Spanish ejaculation which comes from the Arabic and means: "Oh, Allah! May it be so!"